DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 284 274 CS 210 721

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TITLE Transactional Theory in the Teaching of Literature. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Urbana, Ill.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 87
CONTRACT 400-86-0045
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Critical Reading; *English Instruction; Higher Education; Individualized Reading; *Literature Appreciation; *Reader Response; *Reader Text Relationship; Reading Comprehension; Reading Research; Secondary Education; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; *Transactional Theory

ABSTRACT

Intended for literature instructors, this digest explains the relationship of transactional theory (a reciprocal, mutually defining relationship between the reader and the literary text) to the teaching of literature. The importance of the reader's part in literature is first demonstrated, noting that attention must be paid to who the readers are, their expectations of the text, and the choices they make as they read. The digest next differentiates between the efferent stance, in which the reader is primarily concerned with what he or she will carry away as information from the text, and the aesthetic stance, in which the reader focuses primarily upon the experience lived through during the reading. The digest notes that efferent stance is appropriate when seeking information, while the aesthetic stance is useful when the reader wishes to experience the full emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual experiences afforded by the text. Uses of transactional theory in teaching are then discussed, emphasizing the following principles: (1) the "poem" is within the reader, (2) primary responses should be considered, (3) the classroom atmosphere should be cooperative, (4) the conception of literary knowledge will be expanded, and (5) transactional analysis is related to other literary studies. The most salient principles of instruction are also outlined, including: response; giving ideas time to crystallize; and opening up the discussion to the topics of self, text, and others. (SKC)

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Transactional Theory in the Teaching of Literature

Transactional theory, as it applies to literary criticism and the teaching of literature, suggests a "reciprocal, mutually defining relationship" (Rosenblatt 1986) between the reader and the literary text. Louise Rosenblatt argues that the term "interaction" conjures a picture of separate objects encountering one another but remaining essentially unchanged, like billiard balls bouncing off one another, and thus is an inadequate and misleading label for the mutually shaping exchange between reader and text. That exchange—a transaction—is more accurately characterized by Annie Dillard's metaphor. She writes, "The mind fits the world and shapes it as a river fits and shapes its own banks" (1982). Transactional theory proposes that the relationship between reader and text is much like that between the river and its banks, each working its effects upon the other, each contributing to the shape of the poem.

Text and Poem

A teacher who applies transactional theory will not view a literary experience as identical with the text from which it emerges. Rosenblatt argues for a redefinition of terms, suggesting that it is misleading to speak of the text as "poem" (which will serve here as a general term for any literary work). The text is simply ink on paper until a reader comes along. The "poem," on the other hand, is what happens when the text is brought into the reader's mind and the words begin to function symbolically, evoking, in the transaction, images, emotions, and concepts. That symbolic functioning can happen only in the reader's mind. It does not take place on the page, in the text, but in the act of reading. As Wolfgang Iser (1978) describes it, "literary texts initiate 'performances' of meaning rather than actually formulating meanings themselves." The text in the absence of a reader is simply print—it does not become a poem until the act of reading makes it one.

Transactional theory thus places a great deal of emphasis on the role of the reader. If meaning resides not in the text but rather in the enactment by the reader, then the discussion of literature demands consideration of the mind of the individual reader or groups of readers. It requires us

> to see the reading act as an event involving a particular individual and a particular text, happening at a particular time, under particular circumstances, in a particular social and cultural setting, and as part of the ongoing life of the individual and the group. (Rosenblatt 1985)

Such a conception affirms the significance of the unique reader, suggesting that reading should not be submission to the text or an effort to suppress the personal and idiosyncratic in a search for a purified reading, uncontaminated by the reader's individuality. Transactional theory insists that the reader's individuality must be respected and considered, that readers initially understand a work only on the basis of prior experience. They cannot make sense of a text except by seeing it in the light of other experiences, other texts. The reader's background, the feelings, memories, and associations called forth by the reading, are not only relevant, they are the foundation upon which understanding of a text is built. And so transactional theory invites the reader to reflect upon what she brings to any reading, and to acknowledge and examine the responses it evokes.

Stance and Selection—Efferent and Aesthetic

Transactional theory demands attention, in other words, to who the readers are, what they bring to the text, the expectations they have of texts, and the choices they make as they read. The choice of *stance* may be most crucial. Rosenblatt distinguishes between the *efferent stance*, in which the reader is primarily concerned with what he will carry away as information from the text, and the *aesthetic stance*, in which the reader focuses primarily upon the experience lived through during the reading.

The efferent stance is that appropriate to one seeking information. It is the stance adopted by the amateur mechanic intent upon learning, from the manual, how to repair a carburetor. The mechanic reads to extract from the text the information necessary to accomplish a particular task. The rhythms and sounds of the language are of less interest than its accuracy and simplicity. If the prose is graceful, so much the better, but the primary concern is with the task at hand. The efferent is also the stance of listeners attempting to judge the claims and promises of a political candidate. In their transactions with such a text, not only may they not wish to be swayed by the felicities of the prose, but they may also have to guard against the possibility that the pleasures of the language, its compelling rhythms and vivid images, may obscure defects in logic, inadequacies in evidence, and other such matters significant in the analysis of the message.

The aesthetic stance, on the other hand, is that of the reader who comes to a text in a less directive frame of mind, seeking not particular information or the accomplishment of an assigned task, but rather the full emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual experience offered by the text. A reader adopting such a stance attends not only to content—the information, story, or argument offered—but also to the feelings evoked, the associations and memories aroused, the stream of images that pass through the mind during the act of reading. Such reading, in other words, is not undertaken simply as preparation for another experience—fixing the car or voting—but as an experience itself.

Which stance the reader takes—or more accurately, where the reader stands on the spectrum represented by aesthetic and efferent—determines the extent to which experience of a particular text will be "literary." Although the text may contain strong clues that suggest the appropriate stance (as does a poem, with its obvious arrangement in lines and stanzas, and a legal document, with its own set of distinguishing features), a reader may choose to approach it as a source of information—efferently—or as a source of poetic experience—aesthetically. Some texts—those of Annie Dillard, Jacques Cousteau, James Michener, and Lewis Thomas, for instance—seem to invite readings from either or both stances. It is the reader who must determine the stance, selecting for attention certain elements in the reading rather than others, and it is the teacher's task to make students aware of the possibilities.

Implications for Teaching

The poem is within the reader. Transactional theory offers the teacher of literature several assumptions and principles. It suggests that the poem is within the reader, created in the act of reading, rather than in the text. The poem—any literary work—is thus changeable, variable, different for each reader, and differing even for a single reader from one reading to the next. Teachers therefore do not lead classes carefully along to foreseen conclusions, sustained by critical authority, about literary works. Instead, they face the difficult but interesting task of acknowledging the uniqueness of each reader and each reading, accepting the differences, and crafting out of that material significant discussion and writing.

Primary responses are considered. Students are encouraged to respect and examine their responses—emotions, associations, memories, images, ideas. Out of those elements they will create their understandings of the text. Teaching guided by this theory becomes a matter of encouraging students to articulate responses, examine their origins in the text and in other experiences, reflect upon them, and analyze them in the light of other readings—those of other students and critics—and of other information about the literature.

Classroom atmosphere is cooperative. If students are to deal with these matters, many of which will be personal, the literature classroom must be cooperative rather than combative.

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Debate—where one wins and one loses, one is right and the other wrong—is not an appropriate model for most discussion of literature. Discussions should encourage students not to win but to clarify and refine. Students are encouraged to enter into a "reciprocal, mutually defining relationship" in their discussions with students and teachers, as well as in their readings of texts.

The conception of literary knowledge is expanded. The results of such reflection and discussion might be greater knowledge of self, of the text, and of the others with whom the student talks. Although the ability to read intelligently, to observe features of language, to draw inferences about writers, texts, and genres, to express critical judgments, and all the other goals traditional in the literature classroom remain important, transactional theory also suggests that literature may lead to sharpened understanding of ourselves and our society:

> The literary transaction in itself may become a self-liberating process, and the sharing of our responses may be an even greater means of overcoming our limitations of personality and experience. (Rosenblatt 1984)

Relationship to other literary studies. Transactional theory does not deny the validity of other approaches to literature. Historical, biographical, and cultural perspectives may all yield insight into literature. But it does assert that the fundamental literary experience is the encounter of a reader, a unique individual, with a text. Hans Robert Jauss (1982) points out that

> even the critic who judges a new work, the writer who conceives of his work in light of positive or negative norms of an earlier work, and the literary historian who classifies a work in its tradition and explains it historically *are first simply readers.* (emphasis added)

Principles of instruction. The principles of instruction implicit in transactional theory might be these:

1. *Invite response.* Make clear to students that their responses, emotional and intellectual, are valid starting points for discussion and writing.
2. *Give ideas time to crystallize.* Encourage students to reflect upon their responses, preferably before hearing others.
3. *Find points of contact among students.* Help them to see the potential for communication among their different points of view.
4. *Open up the discussion to the topics of self, text, and others.* The literary experience should be an opportunity to learn about all three.
5. *Let the discussion build.* Students should feel free to change their minds, seeking insight rather than victory.
6. *Look back to other texts, other discussions, other experiences.* Students should connect the reading with other experiences.
7. *Look for the next step.* What might they read next? About what might they write?

Literary Knowledge

The epistemology at the base of transactional theory returns the responsibility for learning to the student. Knowledge—especially knowledge of literature—is not something to be found, not something the teacher can give to the student. Rather, it is to be created by the individual through exchanges with texts and other readers.

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A Product of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills
1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801
1987

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. 400-86-0045. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Prior to publication, the manuscript was submitted to English language arts specialists for critical review and determination of professional competence. This publication has met such standards. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of either the National Council of Teachers of English or the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.